

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION

of

Frederick Eldin Niemi

for a

SYSTEM FOR CHARACTERIZING INFORMATION FROM AN
INFORMATION PRODUCER

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to network management applications that manage network devices and specifically to filtering expressions that characterize messages accepted by the network management applications.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Computer networks, to which this invention applies, are systems comprising a number of components such as printers, computers, routers and the like, that are connected to enable communication among the components and sharing of data and resources. For example, a computer network system may include a server that provides shared resources to network users, one or more clients that access shared network resources provided by the server, a physical medium that connects the network computers, and shared data and resources. In order for a computer network system to operate efficiently, a system administrator must constantly monitor and manage each network component. The system administrator generally manages the network by performing the following management tasks: user administration for creating, maintaining and securing user accounts; resource management for implementing and supporting network resources; configuration management for planning, expanding, and maintaining configuration; performance management for monitoring and tracking network activity to maintain and enhance the network's performance; and network maintenance for preventing, detecting and solving network problems. To perform these management tasks effectively, the system administrator must receive timely and accurate information about the state of each network component.

Therefore, the states of network components are constantly monitored by software applications known as "producers". Producers generate error messages or alarm messages when they detect anomalies, i.e. any condition that is not expected. Examples of

producers include a router that generates a "trap", i.e. an error message, whenever it detects an anomaly in a network device and a poller which is a software application that polls the network for data and generates an error or informational message whenever an anomaly is found. Messages from the producers are transmitted to a distributor for further transmission to the appropriate network client or consumer. The distributor is a software application that queues incoming messages from producers and transmits each message to the consumers that request that message. Consumers are software applications that display to the system administrator errors or alarms generated by the producers and they may also perform various functions for correcting the reported anomaly. An example of a consumer is a desktop application that displays a network map displaying the location of each anomaly. Each consumer may be dedicated to reporting and correcting specific network anomalies. Thus when the distributor distributes a message from the producer, it sends the message to only those consumers that requested messages of those anomalies.

After the network starts up, each consumer in the network registers with the distributor. The registration information from each consumer includes filtering expressions that are stored in the distributor's registration list; the filtering expressions are used by the distributor to determine which consumer(s) requested the incoming message for each message type. The filtering expressions are dynamic and may be changed by the system administrator or they may be changed when the consumer detects certain error and/or anomaly conditions. Currently, the filtering expressions are Boolean statements and/or SQL (query) statements which are evaluated by the distributor every time the distributor receives an incoming message. Upon evaluating a message, if a filtering expression is true, the distributor sends the message to the consumer associated with that filtering expression.

Although simple filtering expressions using Boolean or SQL statements are easy to develop, complex filtering expressions using these statements are more difficult to develop. An example of a complex filtering expression is one where the consumer requests only a sampling of error messages from a specific device. Moreover, the SQL and Boo-

lean expressions must be translated into the programming language of the distributor each time they are evaluated, i.e. whenever a new message is received from a producer. Each translation consumes processing time and hinders the performance of the distributor.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 We have created a system whereby each consumer generates a filtering program based on criteria set forth by the system operator during run time. While the network system is operating, the system administrator selects the appropriate filtering criteria from display screens associated with the respective consumers. Each consumer implements its filtering criteria in a filtering program and registers the filtering program with the dis-
10 tributor. Each consumer may also dynamically alter its filtering program during run time when it detects certain error and/or alarm conditions. This allows the consumer to determine and display the root causes of problem(s) being solved on the system and it allows the consumer to determine when a problem has been rectified. With this arrangement, the filtering programs may include simple true or false tests or they may include
15 more complex tests that cannot be implemented using simple Boolean or SQL statements. This provides an environment in which the system operator can effectively narrow the filtering criteria for each consumer and thereby reduce consumer processing of unwanted messages.

Specifically in the preferred embodiment of the invention, the distributor compiles
20 each filtering program provided by each consumer when the consumer registers with the distributor. Unlike Boolean and SQL statements that cannot be translated into the distributor's native language and that must be interpreted each time a query is performed on an incoming message, the filtering programs are written and compiled in the same high level programming language as the distributor. Thereafter, the distributor dynamically
25 loads the compiled filtering programs before executing the filtering queries. Since the distributor does not have to interpret the filtering programs upon receiving each incoming message, it processes and distributes the message faster than the prior distributors that executed Boolean and SQL statements.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The above and further advantages of the invention may be better understood by referring to the following description in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which like reference numbers indicate identical or functionally similar elements:

- 5 Fig. 1 is a diagram of a network management system incorporating the invention;
- Fig. 2 is a schematic diagram of the network management applications and how they interact with each other and with the distributor application;
- Fig. 3 illustrates a message from the producer to the distributor;
- Fig. 4-A illustrates filtering expressions in a Boolean statement;
- 10 Fig. 4-B illustrates filtering expressions in a SQL statement; and
- Fig. 4-C illustrates filtering expressions in a filtering program.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF AN ILLUSTRATIVE EMBODIMENT

Fig. 1 is a schematic diagram of a distributed network management system that is configured to share resources and data in accordance with the present invention. The illustrated system is a combination of four separate local area networks (LAN) 101-104
 15 that are interconnected into a wide area network (WAN) to form a single distributed network structure. Each LAN 101-104 may include servers and clients that are connected by physical media such as cables and network cards in order to share resources such as files or applications. A server is a computer that provides shared network resources to network users and a client is a computer that accesses the shared network resources provided
 20 by the servers. Shared resources in a network may include printers and other peripherals and software applications. The LANs 101-104 are interconnected to communicate with each other by routers 111-114. Routers exchange protocol-specific information between separate networks, determine the best path for sending data and filter broadcast traffic to
 25 local segments of the network structure.

In order to effectively manage a distributed network system, the system administrator must perform user administration, configuration management, performance management and maintenance. Timely and accurate information about the states of each net-

work's component is required for the system administrator to perform the necessary network management functions. Therefore, the states of these network components are consistently monitored by a reporting structure which includes producers which generate error and alarm messages and a distributor which transmits these messages to consumers which display the messages to the system operator.

The illustrative reporting structure 200 shown in Fig. 2 includes three producers 202-206, a distributor 208, and four consumers 210-216. Producers 202-206 are software applications that constantly check the states of network components and produce error and/or alarm messages whenever they detect anomalies. The distributor 208 is a software application which queues messages from producers 202-206 and transmits them to the appropriate network client or consumer 210-216. In the present invention, the distributor 208 is developed in a high level programming language such as JAVA. Consumers 210-216 are software applications that display to the system administrator error or alarm messages of network anomalies.

In accordance with the present invention, when a producer 202-206 detects an anomaly, it generates a message and transmits the message to the distributor 208. The message is stored in the distributor's queue 218. Thereafter, the distributor 208 executes filtering programs 220-226 received from the consumers 210-216, respectively, to determine which of the consumers are to receive the message. If the test from the filtering expressions in a consumer's filter program is true, the distributor 208 forwards the message to that consumer. The consumer then displays the message to the system operator and/or takes other action to correct the anomaly as directed by the system operator.

After the network starts up, each consumer 210-216 enables the system administrator to create filtering expressions through its graphical user interface. While the network system is operating, the system administrator chooses the appropriate filtering criteria from the consumer's display screen. Each consumer 210-216 implements the filtering expressions as a filtering program 220-226 and registers the filtering program with

the distributor 208. Each consumer may also dynamically alter its filtering program during run time if it detects certain error and/or alarm conditions. This enables the consumers to determine and display the root causes of the problems being solved and it enables the consumers to determine when a problem has been rectified. The filtering programs 220-226 are preferably implemented in the same high level programming language as the distributor. The programs may include simple true or false tests or they may include more complex tests that cannot be implemented using Boolean or SQL statements. The filtering programs 220-226 from each consumer are stored in the distributor's registration list and they are used by the distributor to determine which consumers should receive each incoming message.

Specifically in the preferred embodiment of the invention, the distributor 208 compiles each program 220-226 sent from each consumer 210-216 when the consumer registers with the distributor. The filtering programs are preferably compiled in the same native language as the distributor's software application. Thereafter, the distributor 208 dynamically loads the compiled filtering programs 220-226 prior to executing the filtering queries. Since the distributor does not have to interpret the filtering programs upon receiving each incoming message, it executes the message queries faster than distributors that execute Boolean and/or SQL statements.

Figs. 3 is a schematic block diagram depicting the format of a message 300 that is generated by a producer 202-206 and sent to the distributor 208 for transmission to the appropriate consumer(s) 210-216. The message includes a message type 302 identifying the type of message and arguments 304-306 whose values are tested to determine whether a message should be sent to a consumer. Messages from different producers contain different arguments. For example, a message about whether data throughput has exceeded its threshold would contain the current data throughput value but not a status value, whereas, a message about a router's status would contain the status value but it may not contain the data throughput value.

Prior distributors either need to know all of the different message formats that are available for processing in order to examine them or they may execute complex, time-consuming algorithms to determine if a message contains the argument(s) the consumer is interested in. The algorithms then extract the values of those arguments and examine the values. If new message formats with new arguments are introduced, the distributors may have to be updated in order to process the new arguments. In the present invention filters are created at run time. Therefore, new message formats with new arguments can be introduced at anytime without updating the distributor. Additionally, higher level programming languages enable definitions of data structures that match the new message formats and they enable casting of the new messages to these new data structures. Thus, the filters do not have to examine the messages if the desired arguments actually exist in the messages. The filters in the current invention are therefore a lot faster than algorithms used in prior distributors.

Figs. 4-A to 4-C illustrate filtering expressions executed on the message of Fig. 3. The filtering expressions in Figs. 4-A to 4-C are implemented in accordance with a Boolean statement, a SQL statement and a filtering program respectively. Boolean expressions are useful for comparing values or performing true and false tests. Fig. 4-A is an example of a Boolean statement that compares two values. The first part of the Boolean expression tests to see if "data1" in the message is equal to 42 and the second part tests to see if a secondary argument "data2" is equal to 46. If both expressions in the Boolean statement are true, the distributor 208 transmits the message to the consumer 210-216 that registered the statement.

Fig 4-B is an example of a SQL statement. SQL statements are also useful for comparing values and performing other filtering tests. However, SQL statements cannot perform complex filtering tests on statements that are analyzed individually and that are not stored in a database. The first expression in the illustrative SQL statement tests whether the value of data1 is equal to 42 and the second expression tests to see if the value of data2 is less than or equal to 46. If both expressions in the SQL statement are

true, the distributor 208 transmits the message to the consumer 210-216 that registered the statement.

Fig. 4-C is an example of a filtering program. Filtering programs can perform complex queries on individual messages or on groups of messages. The example in Fig.

5. 4-C transmits only the 5th message where the value in data1 is equal to 42.

The foregoing description has been directed to specific embodiments of this invention. It will be apparent, however, that other variations and modifications may be made to the described embodiments, with the attainment of some or all of their advantages. Therefore, it is the object of the appended claims to cover all such variations and
10 modifications as come within the true spirit and scope of the invention.

What is claimed is: